

### Russia-Israel relationship transformed by Syria conflict: political interests overshadow social and economic ties

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# SWP Comment

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## Russia-Israel Relationship Transformed by Syria Conflict

Political Interests Overshadow Social and Economic Ties

*Lidia Averbukh and Margarete Klein*

Recent months have witnessed a warming of relations between Russia and Israel. One indicator of the trend is the frequency of high-level meetings, culminating in Prime Minister Netanyahu's participation – as the only Western state guest – in the military parade on Red square on 9 May. Alongside existing social ties and economic cooperation, the prospect of a recalibration of Russian policy in Syria to take greater account of Israeli security interests has been another important driver. Nevertheless, the Russian-Israeli relationship remains constrained and volatile. For Moscow it is just one element of a multivectoral Middle East policy.

When Russia emerged from the collapsing USSR in December 1991 it inherited a fraught relationship with Israel. Although the Soviet Union had been one of the first countries to recognise Israel in 1948, relations cooled rapidly in the shadow of the Cold War. While the new state of Israel leaned heavily towards the United States, Moscow expanded relations with its Arab neighbours. The Kremlin broke diplomatic ties entirely after the Six-Day War in 1967; they were only restored in October 1991, and subsequently continued by the Russian Federation. Since then the two sides have successively deepened their relationship on the societal, economic and political levels. Russia's military intervention in the Syria conflict in September 2015 marked a new phase in Russian-Israeli relations: They are

now dominated by questions of order and security in the Middle East. In this new situation the long-established twin pillars of the relationship – social ties and shared economic interests – have become secondary, and susceptible to instability in the event of political crisis.

### Primacy of realpolitik

Russia and Israel share important aspects in their strategic cultures. Both pursue a decidedly interest-led realpolitik. Free of value-driven concerns, they have no difficulty pursuing pragmatic selective co-operation where shared interests exist, even if normative differences persist. Both states exhibit a siege mentality, and both are



guided by the primacy of security and a primarily military understanding of power. These shared basic tenets mean that each side can accept the other's core interests. Where these do not clash with their own security needs, Russia and Israel largely refrain from criticising the other's actions, or at least desist from backing criticism with actions.

The shared perception of a threat of Islamist terrorism since the beginning of the century has promoted a Russian-Israeli rapprochement. During the Second Intifada (2000–2005) then Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon not only held back from criticising human rights violations by Russian forces in the Second Chechen War (1999–2009); in fact he backed the Russian line that Chechen separatism was tantamount to terrorism [and drew parallels](#) to the actions of the Palestinians. Israel's volatile security situation also explains why Benjamin Netanyahu's government has expressed no value-based criticism of the Russian military intervention in Syria. Instead Netanyahu has repeatedly referred to the benefits of Russian action against Islamist terrorism there. In view of the massive US and EU condemnation of Russian over Chechnya and Syria, Israel's stance is a political gain for Moscow, helping to uphold the Kremlin's narrative of leading the fight against [international terrorism](#). At the same time Moscow can exploit its understanding with Israel – as a Western ally – internally, to brush aside the impression that Russia has been isolated by the entire Western community. Avoiding isolation by the West is especially important for Moscow during the crisis over Ukraine. Ultimately, Israel declined to participate in sanctions imposed by the EU and the United States in response to the annexation of Crimea and the destabilisation of Donbas.

For the sake of Russian coordination over vital security questions, the Israeli leadership is prepared to implicitly recognise core Russian interests in Russia's post-Soviet neighbourhood. Conversely, since about the turn of the century Moscow has tended to

take significant – although not equal – account of Israeli standpoints. While Russia continues to criticise Israel's actions in Gaza and the West Bank, its tone has softened. Above all, Moscow no longer clearly takes the side of the Palestinian leadership. Even if individual voices in Russia call for a revival of the traditional partnership with Arab nations, President Vladimir Putin in particular wishes to avoid side-taking that would risk the existing cordial relations with the region's strongest military power. Even more so since the Russian intervention in the Syria conflict in September 2015. Instead the Russian leadership is seeking to use its established ties with the Palestinians and improving relations with Israel to position itself as a mediator. That is a course compatible with the pragmatic, non-ideological realpolitik Moscow is pursuing across the Middle East.

## Social ties

When Putin visited Israel in 2005 (as the first Russian president to do so) he emphasised the historic and cultural ties between the two nations. Indeed, the development of societal aspects since the resumption of relations has played a large part in bringing Russia and Israel closer together.

Ever since he assumed office, Putin has presented himself as the protector of the Jewish minority in Russia and in Europe as a whole. In so doing, he alludes in particular to the Soviet Union's struggle against fascism – as demonstrated by his visits to Holocaust memorials and meetings with Russian-Jewish veterans of the Second World War. The world's largest Jewish Museum opened in Moscow in 2012. In the course of the so-called migration crisis [Putin](#) called on Jews living in Western Europe to emigrate to Russia to escape the growing anti-Semitism. The 2016 Russian-Israeli declaration for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations also acknowledged the important role played by the Jewish population in Russian history and culture.

Outside the political elites, a growth in positive attitudes towards Israel can also be observed in Russian society. Despite pronounced everyday anti-Semitism, a [Levada survey](#) in 2017 found that 57 percent of Russians had a positive or very positive attitude towards Israel; for the European Union and the United States the figures were 39 and 37 percent. Whereas anti-Semitism in European societies is often closely bound up with anti-Israel stances, this is not true of Russia, and the boycott movement (BDS), which is gaining influence in the Western world, is a non-issue. One reason is the sympathy for Israel as a militarily and economically highly advanced nation — a picture presented by media and the political leadership. Another is the role played by growing private contacts and informal exchange between the two societies. Israel has become a popular destination for Russian holidaymakers and medical tourists. Visa-free travel, the prevalence of the Russian language and the decline in travel to traditional holiday centres in Turkey and Egypt are among the reasons why 331,500 Russian citizens visited Israel in 2017; a [26 percent](#) increase compared to 2016. Visits by Russian Orthodox pilgrims have also increased since 2008, when Sergei's Courtyard — as part of the Russian Compound in Jerusalem — was returned to the Moscow Patriarch.

Social and cultural ties between Russia and Israel have also been boosted by Jewish emigration to Israel. Aggregated migration from Tsarist Russia, the USSR and its successor states accounts for 15 percent of Israel's population — and 25 percent of its Jewish population. So it should be no surprise if this immigration has shaped Israel both culturally and politically. The family roots of most Israeli prime ministers to date lie within the territory of the former Russian Empire.

The consolidation of social ties between Russia and Israel in recent decades is attributable in particular to the immigration of approximately one million Jews who moved to Israel from the collapsing Soviet Union in the 1990s — and are commonly referred

to simply as “the Russians”. These individuals were politically and culturally socialised in the USSR or the new Russia. They remain, despite being comparatively highly qualified, largely segregated from the rest of the Israeli population in geographical as well as socio-economic terms. This is the group Putin is talking about when he refers to “[our compatriots](#)” with “our mentality”. It is distinct from another set of recent immigrants who moved to Israel after the annexation of Crimea for political or economic reasons. For many — especially the young and well-educated — Israel is merely a staging post en route to another Western destination. Others, with an eye to Western sanctions and political uncertainty, seek dual citizenship. An Israeli passport offers visa-free entry to 105 states (compared to 79 with a [Russian passport](#)) and years of tax breaks following naturalisation. Israel's economic benefit from this type of immigration explains why it waives the usual qualification periods and residency requirements in certain cases, such as the oligarch Roman Abramovich.

In view of the “compatriots” policy eagerly pursued by the Kremlin, fears have been expressed in Israeli media that Moscow could use Israel's Russian-speaking [population for its own political ends](#). Even if Russia has had some successes with this strategy in certain post-Soviet states, the prospects of its replication in Israel are remote. Russian-speaking Israelis represent 15 percent of the Israeli electorate, and have the potential to determine the fate of 18 of the 120 Knesset seats (which can easily be decisive in a coalition system). They tend to vote for Israel our Home, the clientele party of the Russian speaking immigrants. The group, however, had developed a strong Israeli identity. Also their diverse background mitigate against the possibility of being used by Moscow. Although their roots in the former Soviet Union define the space they occupy within Israeli society, they see themselves first as Israeli citizens. One relevant piece of evidence is the low rate of participation in Russian elections by the 50,000 Israelis who

also possess a Russian passport. [Only 8 per-cent](#) of them voted in the Russian presidential election in March 2018.

The attitude of Russian-speaking Israelis towards the Russian leadership is also very ambivalent. This is partly attributable to the experience of the Jewish minority in the Soviet Union – which was for decades permitted neither to practice their religion nor to emigrate. Another relevant aspect is that many of these individuals originate not from Russia itself, but from the territory of what is now Ukraine and other states linked to the former USSR. Russia's military actions in 2008 in Georgia and since 2014 in Ukraine have further widened the contradictions within this group. Many immigrants from the territory of the former Soviet Union do use Russian-language media as a source of information, but in Israel these represent a broader political spectrum. In other words, merely using Russian-language media is not automatically an indicator of openness to Kremlin influence.

These deep societal connections have helped the Russian and Israeli leaderships to advance their – primarily politically motivated – rapprochement process. But they are not the main driver of the relationship. The connections are stronger on the Israeli side, but their political effect is limited by ambivalences within the group of Russian-speaking Israelis. On the Russian side in turn, societal factors generally play no role in the formulation of foreign policy. Instead, references to shared history and culture by Russia's leadership serve its representation as a friend of Israel. Seen from that perspective, the social ties between Russia and Israel would not be strong enough to soften a crisis in political relations.

## Economic interests

The resumption of diplomatic relations between Russia and Israel laid the foundations for economic cooperation. At first the question was simply to get trade started, for

example with a trade agreement (1994) and an agreement on cooperation in science and technology (1994). In the past decade the two states have increased their cooperation in specific sectors, as reflected in agreements on space research (2011), nuclear technology (2013) and nano-technology (2016). Since 2016 negotiations have also been under way on a free trade agreement between the Eurasian Economic Union – the Russian-led economic integration project with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia and Belarus – and Israel.

Trade has grown enormously since the restoration of relations, reaching a volume of \$2.5 billion in 2017 – with Israel overtaking Iran (\$1.7 billion); but Israel's share of Russia's foreign trade [is still just](#) 0.4 per cent – and far behind Russia's most important Middle Eastern partner Turkey (\$20.9 billion).

While Russia largely exports resources to Israel (40 percent oil, 32 percent precious metals), its main imports are agricultural products (36 percent), machines (28 percent) and chemicals (22 percent). The figures indicate that Israel has been profiting indirectly from Russian counter-sanctions on European agricultural products.

The main potential for Russian-Israeli trade relations achieving strategic significance lies in energy and high-tech. Since the discovery of the Leviathan gas field off the Israeli coast in 2010, Russian firms have been seeking to participate in the exploration rights. Russia wants to secure a share of the Israeli energy market and influence the EU's energy diversification efforts in the eastern Mediterranean.

Russia eyes Israel as a potential modernisation partner in the field of high-tech. Cooperation agreements have been established between Israeli firms and research institutes and the Russian state nano-technology institute Rosnano (2012) and the Russian innovation centre Skolkovo (2016). Israel's start-up scene makes it an attractive partner for Russian economic modernisation, especially in view of the impact of sanctions on exchange with other Western countries. But for cooperation to take place the

private sector in Russia would have to get on board the currently state-driven projects. The dearth of private sector commitment to date is reflected in low levels of [direct investment](#) between the two states: in 2017 just \$570 million in Israel and \$480 million in Russia.

At the same time Russia and Israel are rivals in the global arms markets. Moscow traditionally supplies Israel's Arab neighbours and Iran. Israel has in recent years exported increasing amounts of arms and matériel to post-Soviet states, especially Azerbaijan. Technological cooperation between the Russian and Israeli defence sectors has been very limited to date: the production of Israeli drones for the Russian armed forces was terminated in the course of the Ukraine crisis. This demonstrates the narrow limits that still apply to cooperation in the sensitive field of security, especially in light of Israel's close and deep security partnership with the United States.

Even if the two states have expanded their bilateral trade, the economic pillar of the relationship is without strategic significance. Development potential does exist within several branches, and if fully utilised could make Israel a partner for Russia's modernisation. But such a scenario is hindered by obstacles on the Russian side: weakness of innovation, lack of legal certainty, strong dependency on the state. For its part, Israel has security concerns, above all in the energy and defence sectors.

## The Syria conflict as stress test

Military intervention in Syria in September 2015 opened a new phase in Russia's Middle East policy in general and Moscow's relations with Israel in particular. Relations with Israel now require greater coordination and are characterised by greater fragility. The conflict dynamic in Syria and the associated questions of regional order and security represent a stress test for the Russian-Israeli relationship.

## De-conflicting

Russia's intervention in Syria created a need on both sides to avoid unintentional military clashes by establishing functioning communication channels and dependable arrangements. To this end the two armed forces [set up a de-conflicting mechanism](#) in autumn 2015. It is embedded in a format of frequent high-level discussions between the Russian president and the Israeli prime minister, as well as between the defence ministers and intelligence service chiefs. The mechanism permitted Israel to conduct air strikes on Hezbollah positions and convoys without interference by Russian air defence. The Israeli leadership's assurance that it was interested only in the threat from pro-Iranian forces — and not in toppling Assad — was crucial for Moscow's consent to the arrangement. Unlike the Russian-Turkish relationship, which was plunged into deep crisis by the shooting down of a Russian warplane in November 2015, Russian-Israeli relations long remained unproblematic even as both operated militarily in Syria. But as the conflict progressed the de-conflicting mechanism came under pressure. Israel's threat perception and strategy changed after Assad and his allies recaptured large parts of Syria. Netanyahu's government is now concerned that Tehran is establishing a permanent military presence in Syria, especially along the border to Israel. In order to prevent this, Israel seems to have shifted from a [policy of containing](#) pro-Iranian forces through isolated air strikes to one of [driving its forces out of Syria](#) by military means, and greatly expanded its air strikes on Syrian territory from February 2018. In the process Israeli also targeted positions of significance for Russia's military operation: In February 2018, following a drone attack attributed to pro-Iranian forces and the downing of an Israeli warplane by the Syrian air force, the Israeli air force struck a base in Syria (T4), where Russian military advisors were also present. This plunged the hitherto informal arrangement with Russia into crisis. The Russian military leadership sharply criti-



cised Israel's actions, and floated the idea of responding by supplying the [S-300 anti-aircraft system](#) to the Syrian armed forces. That would have meant Russia abandoning its long-standing line of observing vital Israeli interests in its arms supplies to Syria.

It took a face-to-face meeting between Putin and Netanyahu in May 2018 in Moscow to defuse the crisis. Russia not only withdrew its threat to supply Syria with S-300 batteries; even more importantly Moscow now tolerates Israel's tougher strategy against pro-Iranian forces in Syria. Putin and Netanyahu appear to have agreed that Moscow will accept Israeli air strikes against pro-Iranian combatants not only along Syria's southern border but also in its interior. So the Kremlin refrained from criticising Israeli air strikes on Syrian territory the day after Netanyahu's visit to Moscow, which were the largest since 1973. And in return Israel raised no objections to the Syrian army's military offensive with Russian air support in the southern deescalation zone. Putin also expressed understanding for Israeli's demand for the withdrawal of Iranian forces from Syria. Whereas in November 2017 Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was still describing the presence of Iranian fighters in Syria as legitimate, at a [meeting with Assad](#) on 17 May 2018 Putin called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Syria after "the launch of an active phase of a political process" — with the exception of Russia which is there at the invitation of the Syrian regime. Both developments suggest a partial recalibration of Russia's policy on Syria, with greater willingness to take account of Israeli security interests. This reflects the priority placed by the Russian leadership on safeguarding its own armed forces in Syria: In the event of an escalation Israel would be capable of significantly complicating the military situation for Russia. Moscow also expects Israel's cooperation when it comes to shaping a new Syrian political order.

## The Iran factor

Russia's tacit acceptance of Israeli air strikes in Syria and its change in rhetoric towards the Iranian military presence reflect a concern that Washington might abandon the restraint it has shown if the Israeli-Iranian conflict were to escalate in Syria. A serious US military intervention could gravely endanger the military and political gains Russia has achieved to date.

The outward convergence with Israel also reflects a growing rivalry between Russia and Iran in Syria. The more Assad regains his grip on power, the more pressing the question of Syria's future political and economic order. Moscow and Tehran are set under this scenario to compete over economic advantage and political influence. At the same time the two countries remain militarily dependent on one another in Syria. The Russian military intervention is largely restricted to its air force with limited participation by ground forces (special forces, military police (in particular from Chechnya) and mercenaries), any stabilisation of Assad's rule will require the assistance of the pro-Iranian forces present in Syria. The state of the Syrian army offers little grounds to believe that it could soon take over the military tasks hitherto undertaken by pro-Iranian forces. A meaningful weakening of the groups supported by Tehran would therefore automatically demand greater military engagement by Russia — which President Putin would be keen to avoid for domestic political reasons.

Moscow has no immediate interest in massively weakening Iran in Syria, nor would it be in any position to do so. However Russia appears willing to exert a moderating influence on Tehran and Hezbollah and establish a buffer zone in southern Syria, with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declaring in July 2018 that only the Syrian army should be operating in regions bordering Israel and Jordan. According to media reports Lavrov offered Israel support for a withdrawal of Iranian and pro-Iranian forces to at least [one hundred kilometres](#) from the Israeli border. It is unclear whether

Moscow could guarantee such a buffer zone, and anyway [Israel had rejected the proposal as inadequate](#). It should be noted that Russia does not share Israel's interest in driving Tehran completely out of Syria and massively weakening Iranian influence in the Middle East as a whole. Moscow's return to the region is predicated above all on its ability to maintain good relations with all parties, especially those that are hostile to one another. Being courted by all sides is what could potentially make Russia the region's most important "go-to-power". For that to occur it requires leverage in all directions. It is this realpolitik that would deter Moscow from siding firmly with Israel.

## Selective cooperation with clear limits

Russia's rapprochement with Israel is still far from a strategic partnership based on shared goals and mutual trust. The relationship between the two countries remain highly pragmatic, interest-driven and marked by selective cooperation. The relationship is currently driven by the Syria conflict and other developments in the Middle East, while specific social and economic ties are less decisive. In the event of a security conflict — for example over Syria or Iran — Russia and Israel might not be able to prevent a deterioration of ties.

The limits of Russian overtures to Israel are clearly visible. They lie in the unpredictable conflict dynamic in Syria and the diverging interests concerning the roles of Iran and the United States in the region. If Moscow succeeds in satisfying Israeli security needs by keeping pro-Iranian forces out of southern Syria this would foster trust on the Israeli side. At the same time it would be conceivable for that scenario to lead to a — very limited — improvement in the Russian-American relationship. If the idea

of a buffer zone fails and Israel decides to strike massively at pro-Iranian forces across Syria — potentially accompanied by a significant US military engagement — the Russian-Israeli relationship could quickly cool. Such a development would threaten Russia's core interest in the region: to preserve the military and political successes achieved to date in Syria and in the Middle East more broadly.

Options for Germany and the EU exist but are limited. On the one hand, they do share interests with Russia. Both sides would like to avoid a military escalation on the Israeli-Iranian front. Russia is currently the actor best able to avert escalation, on account of its military presence on the ground and its established communication channels both to the Israeli leadership and to Hezbollah and Tehran. On the other hand, in view of the damage to overall trust caused by the crisis over Ukraine and diverging interests in relation to the future order for Syria, Germany and the EU face serious obstacles in achieving any coordinated action with Russia. Besides, Germany and the EU would not be Russia's preferred key partner. As revealed at the Helsinki summit between Putin and Trump in July 2018, Moscow would prefer to use its special position in Syria and the Middle East and its direct line to Israel for a possible rapprochement with the Trump administration.

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